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President's News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Matters

Following is a transcript of President Reagan's news conference in Washington last night, as recorded by The New York Times:

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Debate Material

Q. Regarding the Carter debate material obtained by your 1980 campaign organization, do you think it was right or wrong to keep this material, to use it for your advantage, and also do you think it's O.K. to keep someone on your staff who did indeed handle this material?

A. Well now, Jim, to try to answer your several questions there, first of all, I never knew until you people made it public in the press a few days ago that there ever had been such material in possession of any people in our campaign organization. I never saw anything of the kind, and as I recall the debate, I don't recall any particular use that could have been made of anything of that kind because having found the papers they must have been referring to that some of our people do recall seeing, there wasn't anything of campaign strategy in those. They were the type of thing that would be I think in any campaign — positions that they would take on my positions, their achievements and what they thought their Administration had achieved. We probably had literature of the same kind on our side.

But everything that was used in that debate had been used over and over again out on the campaign trail. And I'd like to call to your attention also that the two contestants do not set the tone of the debate or the agenda. The four journalists that asked the questions are the ones that determine what you're going to talk about. And unless they had some material in advance, we answered the questions that they asked.

Now, the other thing is that in an effort to get at this you ask about right or wrong, we have turned over everything that we have been able to find that we had to the Justice Department and here, as you all I think have seen and are going to see if you haven't, almost two full pages, is everything that we could find with the time at which it was turned over to the Justice Depart-

ment with my request that they monitor this very carefully and if they find that there was any incidence of wrongdoing on the part of anyone in our organization — or anyone in the Carter organization — then take whatever action is appropriate.

But to get to the bottom of this, because no one ever, it seems strange to me that since I was the debater, no one on our side ever mentioned to me anything of this kind, or that they had anything, or told me any of the things that supposedly were in there.

As a matter of fact, some of the things that were said there were all my own.

Q. Was it right to have this material back then at that time or should your people have followed the example known about in another case where this material came into someone's possession and was returned unopened: We don't want it, send it back. Should that have been the way this was handled or was it proper to look at this material even having received it?

A. Well, I don't know that it came in any kind of a cover or anything to denote what it was. As I've said, we've asked the Justice Department to find out if there was anything improper going on or anything that was illegal in any way or any wrongdoing and take whatever action is necessary. But since it never got to the debater, what purpose did it serve?

Ethical Implications

Q. Mr. President, I'd like to try that right-and-wrong question once again, just to see how you evaluate this. Do you see these questions about the Carter briefing book as important, really important, possessing ethical implications? Or do you see this merely as a highly political effort by the Democrats? One that you find you must address simply because it has political implications?

A. Godfrey, how could you think that there was anything political in this? I happen to agree with House Speaker Tip O'Neill, who said today that he didn't think the debate would have turned out any differently one way or the other, and they thought the thing ought to go away and he didn't think there ought to be a Congressional investigation of it. I found he was speaking with words of profound wisdom.

Q. Just as a matter of curiosity and followup — have you called Mr. Casey in and asked him what he may know about all this? Anything?

A. We've all talked about this, and we evidently had a stack of papers that has gone over to the Justice Department that are available for anyone, that were passed — and anyone who has been around a campaign knows the reams of paper, the reams of proposals and plans that come in to you — that were passed over, and I can understand his very well not having paid any attention. He wasn't going to wade through a stack of papers. They didn't come in a binder or a cover or anything. And, as I say, evidently the book that is now being peddled to many of you is not what was in our possession. No one that we've talked to that said that they saw these papers at one time or other, none of them say they ever saw that book that is the strategy book.

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